

Food Marketing and Childhood Obesity Report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On December 6, 2005, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) released its report on the effects of food marketing on children, which it described as “the most comprehensive review to date of the scientific evidence on the influence of food marketing on diets and diet-related health of children and youth.”¹ As discussed below, the IOM’s key findings are that, not surprisingly, there is strong evidence that television advertising influences the food preference, purchasing requests, and short-term consumption habits of children ages 2 - 11 (however, there is insufficient evidence of this influence for 12 - 18 year olds).

The IOM also found that there is evidence of an “association” between television viewing time (not advertising specific) by children and teens and body fat (which is referred to in this report as “adiposity”). However, while the distinction may have been lost in the popular press, the IOM was careful to note that “evidence of association is not evidence of causation.” In fact, after reviewing all of the available data, the report concluded that “current evidence is not sufficient to arrive at any finding about a causal relationship from television advertising to [body fat] among children and youth.”

The IOM’s key findings and recommendations are further discussed below.

FINDINGS

Relationships between TV Advertising and Precursors of Diet

The Committee first assessed evidence relevant to the effect of marketing on precursors of diet such as: food and beverage preferences; food and beverage requests; and food and beverage beliefs.

Finding: Given the findings from the systematic evidence review of the influence of marketing on the precursors of diet, and the evidence from content analyses that the preponderance of television food and beverage advertising relevant to children and youth promotes high-calorie and low-nutrient products, it can be concluded that television advertising influences children to prefer and request high-calorie and low-nutrient foods and beverages.

A. TV Advertising and Food and Beverage Preferences

Finding: There is strong evidence that television advertising influences the food and beverage preferences of children ages 2 - 11 years. There is insufficient evidence about its influence on the preferences of teens ages 12 - 18 years.

B. TV Advertising and Food and Beverage Purchase Requests

Finding: There is strong evidence that television advertising influences the food and beverage purchase requests of children ages 2 - 11 years. There is insufficient evidence about

its influence on the purchase requests of teens ages 12 - 18 years.

C. TV Advertising and Food and Beverage Beliefs

Finding: There is moderate evidence that television advertising influences the food and beverage beliefs of children ages 2 - 11 years. There is insufficient evidence about its influence on the beliefs of teens ages 12 - 18 years.

Relationships between marketing and diet

The Committee next considered whether marketing influences actual dietary behavior. Due to the nature of the evidence, the Committee considered effects on both short- and long-term food and beverage consumption.

A. Short-term Consumption Habits—

Short-term diet include such things as the number of pieces of fruit or candy consumed in a child care setting during an afternoon following an exposure to television advertising for fruit or candy that morning.

Finding: There is strong evidence that television advertising influences the short-term consumption of children ages 2 - 11 years. There is insufficient evidence about its influence on the short-term consumption of teens ages 12 - 18 years.

B. Usual Dietary Intake

Finding: There is moderate evidence that television advertising influences the usual dietary intake of younger children ages 2 - 5 years and weak evidence that it influences the usual dietary intake of older children ages 6 - 11 years. There is also weak evidence that it does not influence

the usual dietary intake of teens ages 12 - 18 years.

Relationship between marketing and Adiposity

Lastly, the Committee assessed marketing and healthrelated outcomes. The available evidence was almost entirely based on the relationship of television advertising exposure – primarily measured by television viewing time – and adiposity among children and teens.

Finding: Statistically, there is strong evidence that exposure to television advertising is associated with adiposity in children ages 2 - 11 years and teens ages 12 - 18 years.

The report elaborated on the meaning of “association” stating that “evidence of association is not evidence of causation.”

Finding: The association between adiposity and exposure to television advertising remains after taking alternative explanations into account, but the research does not convincingly rule out other possible explanations for the association; therefore, current evidence is not sufficient to arrive at any finding about a causal relationship from television advertising to adiposity among children and youth. It is important to note that even a small influence, aggregated over the entire population of American children and youth, would be consequential in impact. In the report and press briefing, the Committee emphasized the need for more information and research to better assess marketing and childhood obesity.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE COMMITTEE

In addition to further research, the Committee

made a number of recommendations addressing multiple sectors—food and beverage production, processing, packaging, and sales; marketing practice standards; media initiatives; parents, caregivers, and families; school environments; and public policy.

The report noted that all sector recommendations should be implemented together, as a package, to support and complement one another. This point was further emphasized at the press briefing.

A. Food and Beverage Production and Promotion

Recommendation: Food and beverage companies should use their creativity, resources, and full range of marketing practices to promote and support more healthful diets for children and youth.

Recommendation: Full-service restaurant chains, family restaurants, and quick serve restaurants should use their creativity, resources, and full range of marketing practices to promote healthful meals for children and youth.

Recommendation: Food, beverage, restaurant, retail, and marketing industry trade associations should assume transforming leadership roles in harnessing industry creativity, resources, and marketing on behalf of healthful diets for children and youth.

B. Marketing Practice Standards

Recommendation: The food, beverage, restaurant, and marketing industries should work with government, scientific, public health, and consumer groups to establish and enforce the highest standards for the marketing of foods, beverages, and meals to children and youth.

C. Media and Entertainment Initiatives

Recommendation: The media and entertainment industry should direct its extensive power to promote healthful foods and beverages for children and youth.

D. Parents, Care Givers, and Families

Recommendation: Government, in partnership with the private sector, should create a long-term, multifaceted, and financially sustained social marketing program supporting parents, caregivers, and families in promoting healthful diets for children and youth.

E. School Environments

Recommendations: State and local educational authorities, with support from parents, health authorities, and other stakeholders, should educate about and promote healthful diets for children and youth in all aspects of the school environment (e.g., commercial sponsorships, meals and snacks, curriculum).

F. Public Policy

Recommendation: Government at all levels should marshal the full range of public policy levers to foster the development and promotion of healthful diets for children and youth.

“HEALTHY FOOD” NOT DEFINED

Missing from the report was the definition of “healthy food.” During the press briefing, the Committee acknowledged that “healthy food” was not defined. They also indicated their desire to work with industry on a common understanding of the term, however, emphasized that the primary focus should be on “healthy diet” and, within that, the foods and beverages that support a healthy diet.

KELLEY DRYE COLLIER SHANNON

**ADVERTISING AND MARKETING
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Our team is at the forefront of advertising and obesity issues. Our members regularly speak at seminars and conferences, and publish articles on this issue.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

If you have any questions about this alert, please feel free to contact one of our team members at (202) 342-8400 or via email:

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